

REVISITING THE PAST, RECASTING THE PRESENT: THE RECEPTION OF GREEK ANTIQUITY IN MUSIC, 19TH CENTURY TO THE PRESENT

CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS



Hellenic Music Centre



EDITED BY KATERINA LEVIDOU AND GEORGE VLASTOS



Study Group for Russian
and Eastern European Music



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Athens, 1–3 July 2011**

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KATERINA LEVIDOU AND GEORGE VLASTOS**

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Approaches to Ancient Greek Mythology in Contemporary Serbian Music: Ideological Contexts^{*}

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ABSTRACT: In contemporary Serbian music the opuses of two composers, Vlastimir Trajković (1947) and Aleksandra-Anja Đorđević (1970), stand out as marked by their interest in themes from ancient Greek mythology. It is quite possible that Trajković, as Đorđević's professor of composition at the Belgrade Faculty of Music, instilled his great admiration for ancient Greek culture into the mind of his talented student. This paper will be focused on the different approaches to those themes in the works of those two composers, which could be seen as resulting not only from their different artistic personalities, but also from their different age and the changes music has undergone in the recent times.

Among the most important achievements of Trajković could be counted two works without vocal parts: *Arion, le nuove musiche* (Arion, The New Music), Op. 8, for guitar and strings (1979), and *Le Retour des Zéphyres... ou 'Zefiro torna...': Trois tableaux vivants de scènes mythologiques* (Zephyrus Returns... or 'Zefiro torna...': Three Live Images of Mythological Scenes), for flute, viola and piano (2003). They clearly demonstrate the composer's strong inclination to the cultural heritage of ancient Greece as a whole, which he regards as an everlasting inspiration for renewal in the arts and music. It is important to add that Trajković feels that in modern music this valuable heritage has been interpreted in most imaginative ways in the works of Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel, to whom the second and third movement of *Zephyrus Returns* are dedicated. As expected, his own music has marked neo-impressionistic traits.

On the other hand, Anja Đorđević regards ancient Greek mythology as a rich well for universalising her critical views on the relations among individuals in the (post)modern society. In her chamber opera *Narcissus and Echo* (2002) and stage cantata *Atlas* (2008), both composed on original libretti, she deals with the issues of narcissism, fate, rebellion and freedom. Especially in the opera, she displays a postmodernist sensibility, a high sense of irony and parody, and leans heavily on pop music.

In contemporary Serbian music the opuses of two composers, Vlastimir Trajković (1947) and Aleksandra-Anja Đorđević (1970), stand out as marked by their interest in themes from ancient Greek mythology. It is quite possible that Trajković, as Đorđević's professor of composition at the Belgrade Faculty of Music, instilled his great admiration for ancient Greek culture into the mind of his talented student. This paper will be focused on the different approaches to those themes in the works of those two composers, which could be seen as resulting not only from their different artistic personalities, but also from their different age and the changes Serbian music has undergone in the recent times.

^{*} This paper was written as a part of the project *Serbian Musical Identities within Local and Global Frameworks: Traditions, Changes, Challenges* (no. 177004 /2011–2014/) funded by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Serbia.

Before proceeding to the main issues, a short overview of Serbian composers' attitude towards ancient Greek mythology will be given. The list of those works in twentieth-century Serbian art music is not a particularly long one. The reason for that could be found most certainly in the predominant orientation, at least in the first half of the century, towards subjects from Serbian cultural heritage, with the aim of creating a National School of music. After a modest collection of only a handful of works dealing with ancient Greek topics composed before 1945, the two post-war decades saw a growing number of pieces of different genres inspired by those themes: several operas and ballets, an oratorio, a cycle of songs, and incidental music. It is difficult to be certain about the reasons for this heightened interest, especially as the quantity of works was still not very high. It may simply be that the then younger generations wished to enlarge the programmatic scope of their works towards ancient Greek (and Roman) subjects, that were seen as universal – belonging to all humanity. The interest has stayed more or less the same until today.

Attention will be first drawn to the output of Trajković, which is considered not only to be highly accomplished from the artistic point of view, but also to possess markers of certain ideological contents which invite interpretation.

Born in 1947, Trajković began to study in the post-serialist time, when the crisis of post-war avant-garde was quite evident. He graduated in composition from the Belgrade Music Academy with Vasilije Mokranjac (1923–1984), a highly respected Serbian composer who, although himself very cautious in his approach to modern trends, encouraged his pupils to follow their creative curiosity in all possible directions.

In this paper two of Trajković's works will be discussed from the point of view of a contemporary (Serbian) composer's will to situate his world of music within the rich European tradition, that had Greek culture as an important source of inspiration for renewal in critical moments of its history. Trajković's works make evident his strong inclination to the Franco-Latin current of European music, whose outstanding creative periods – such as the Renaissance, eighteenth-century Classicism, and Impressionism – were different interpretations of ancient Greek culture.

After his earliest attempts to compose in the late 1960s, Trajković was drawn towards twentieth-century French music, more specifically towards the works of Debussy and Ravel. He decided to spend the years 1977 and 1978 in Paris in order to continue his studies in the class of Olivier Messiaen. His case was unique, as his generation of Serbian composers were mostly attracted by the possibilities offered by Polish avant-garde music. Trajković obviously felt that there still existed some new approaches to music that would strive neither towards the continuation of avant-garde trends, nor towards post-modernist 'games'. As a result, his output contains elements of different styles well merged, which in most works create a kind of post-impressionistic effect and atmosphere, balanced and clear form, with complex harmonic and rhythmic organisation.¹ Trajković also shows a refined feeling for suggesting

¹ Trajković's works have received laudable remarks from Olivier Messiaen and Alexandre Tansman, among others: 'Vlastimir Trajković [...] est un compositeur yougoslave de très grand talent. Il possède une nature poétique, un sens très aigu des timbres et des harmonies rares, et une excellente technique orchestrale [...]

the changeable pace of time and its illusionary effects, which was one among many aspects that drew him to the music of Debussy, as shown in *Tempora retenta* for symphonic orchestra (1971), one of his first fully-accomplished works. Exploring the modal harmonies in the works of French modernists, especially those of Debussy, Ravel and Messiaen, he developed his own use of harmony, tending towards sensuous and more relaxed harmonic landscapes, thus rejecting the line of harsh sounds and atonal climates of much of post-1945 music. The world of Franco-Latin Europe had always been close to him, and in some works he also expressed high esteem for the ancient Greek heritage, specifically that of mythology, as will be shown shortly. One detail could also shed some light on Trajković's special relations to the ancient Greek culture. Namely, he insisted that the titles of the three movements of his Concerto for piano and orchestra in B flat major (1990) should be always written in Greek, in the original or in transcription: 1. Stasis. Anochē. Hypostasis, 2. Achthos. Episkepsis. Ēsychia, 3. Diaponēmata. Apolysis.² Trajković's Concerto for viola and orchestra in G minor (1993) also has subtitles in Greek: 1. Theseis kai metatheseis prōtai (First Theses and Metatheses); 2. Nēnemīa. Algos ēsychaion (The Windless Landscape. A Tacit Pain); 3. Theseis kai metatheseis deyterai (Second Theses and Metatheses). Some of his works make use of Italian or French for the same purpose. For instance, his Sonata for flute and piano (1986) and his Sonata for violin and viola (1987) have Italian texts. They are French and Italian in *Le Retour des Zéphyres... ou 'Zefiro torna': Trois tableaux vivants de scènes mythologiques* (Zephyrus Returns, ... or 'Zefiro torna...': Three Live Images of Mythological

Son *Duo* pour piano et orchestre, d'une écriture très forte et très puissante, est probablement son chef-d'œuvre, et, en tout cas, une pièce d'une rare beauté' (Vlastimir Trajković [...] is a Yugoslav composer of very great talent. He is endowed with a poetical nature, and possesses an acute sense of timbres and original harmonies, as well as an excellent orchestral technique [...] His *Duo* for piano and orchestra, of a very strong and very powerful writing, probably his masterpiece, is certainly a work of exceptional beauty). Olivier Messiaen in the brochure about Vlastimir Trajković, published in French, Éditions Max Eschig, Paris, 1979. Also: 'Je [...] considère [Vlastimir Trajković] comme une révélation d'un talent hors-pair, se détachant sur le fond changeant de la création contemporaine des dernières années, par une individualité forte où une vitalité puissante est liée à une poésie très attachante [...] Son œuvre se révèle comme une admirable (et, aujourd'hui, rare) synthèse de l'invention intuitive et de l'intelligence constructive et contrôlée, où rien n'est gratuit' (I consider him [Vlastimir Trajković] a revelation of a peerless talent standing out on the changing background of the contemporary creation of these last years, as a talent of powerful individuality in which strong vitality combines with a very appealing poetic imagination [...] His music reveals itself as an admirable (and nowadays rare) synthesis of intuitive invention and constructional, controlled intelligence, without anything gratuitous). Alexandre Tansman in the same brochure.

² The words are in ancient Greek but are still used and are common in modern Greek:

Anochē means forbearance, endurance, allowance.

Hypostasis (produced from hypo, meaning under, and stasis) means the foundation, something that supports; also, the essence, the substance (which is the latinisation of hypostasis). It is also the name of a category of neumes in Byzantine music notation.

Achthos means weight, burden, as well as sorrow, grief.

Episkepsis (deriving from epi (on) and skepsis (thought)) means in ancient Greek a looking at, inspection, consideration, reflexion. In Modern Greek its most common use is: visit.

Ēsychia means stillness, quiet, silence.

Diaponēmata is very little used in Modern Greek. It is the plural of *diaponēma* that means a work or anything achieved through hard labour, proving a theory.

Apolysis means release, deliverance. It is used in church for the end of the liturgy.

I am grateful to Prof. Katy Romanou for kindly providing me with the meaning of those terms.

Scenes) for flute, viola and piano (2003), and exclusively French in *D'aiguières et d'alcarazas* (Jugs and Stoups, 2002). All these carefully formulated texts indicate the specific worlds of culture closest to Trajković, those with which he has always felt strongest relatedness.

Before approaching *Arion* and *Zephyrus Returns*, the two works announced in the abstract of this paper, a short comment will be given on *Epimetheus* for organ, a piece preceding the other two. It was written in 1977, at the time when Trajković was staying in Paris as Messiaen's student, but, maybe surprisingly, it does not hold any reference to the music of the French master. Instead, the influence of American minimalism may be detected, which would prove to be more than just a passing interest for the composer. The three movements bear the titles 'Epimētheys' (Epimetheus), 'To kouti tēs Pandōras' (Pandora's Box) and 'Elpis mataia' (Futile Hope).

One may wonder in which way the titles of the work and of its movements relate to the music. It is significant that Trajković, according to his own testimony,³ gave those titles only upon having finished the piece; he became aware then of the 'minimalistically-pagan sound of the work' and found it suitable to put titles referring to the ancient Greek myth. The same applies to his other works, to mention just *Arion* and *Zephyrus Returns* – and not only to their titles and subtitles, but also to the glosses and dedications they hold, all those texts being viewed as 'corresponding in a relevant way' with the musical text.

The first piece that will be discussed is *Arion – le nuove musiche* for guitar and strings (1979), whose first performances were received with great surprise by the Belgrade public, accustomed as they were to the often aggressive avant-garde music of younger composers, since the fifteen-minute-long piece was almost defiantly gentle and peaceful. Its title refers to the monodic *stile recitativo* – an allusion to Giulio Caccini's collection of madrigals and arias *Le nuove musiche* (1602). Trajković's work obviously pleads for a reappraisal of the post-1945 development of art music, rejecting the obsessive avant-garde search for novelties. As is well known, Caccini's 'new music' was an important contribution to the aspirations of certain Italian composers of his time to create music that would possess new expressivity – 'a kind of music by which men might, as it were, talk in harmony' (as he writes in the Introduction to his collection).⁴ Trajković's *Arion* has no vocal parts; the 'new expressivity' is explored there within the frame of monodic writing in the strings, but also, in a way, in the guitar part.

Six verses by the Roman poet Ovid from the *Fastorum liber secundus* stand as a motto of the work, which make reference to the legend of Arion, and are linked with the disappearance of the Dolphin constellation on 3 February.

Inde (fide maius) tergo delphina recurvo
Se memorant oneri supposuisse novo.
Ille sedens citharamque tenens pretiumque vehendi
Cantat et aequoreas carmine mulcet aquas.

³ Related to the author of this paper.

⁴ See Oliver Strunk (ed.), *Source Readings in Music History* (New York: Norton, 1950), 378.

Di pia facta vident: astris delphina receptit
Iuppiter et stellas iussit habere novem

Then (beyond belief) they say a dolphin
Yielded its back to the unaccustomed weight.
Sitting there, Arion gripped the lyre, and paid his fare
In song, soothing the ocean waves with his singing.
The gods see good deeds: Jupiter took the dolphin
And ordered its constellation to contain nine stars⁵
(*Fasti*, ll. 113–118)

A poet and singer from Lesbos, inventor of dithyramb, Arion could be compared to Orpheus. After having stayed in Sicily and southern Italy (Magna Graecia) for some time, he wished to return to Greece, but was aggressed by the sailors of the boat. He obtained the favour of singing one last time and then took the chance to escape, jumping into the sea, where he was saved by a dolphin charmed by his song. Jupiter then welcomed Arion among the stars and transformed the eight-star constellation of the Dolphin into a nine-star one.

Known for his inclination to supply the scores of his (almost exclusively instrumental) works with comments regarding his aesthetical aims and performance details, Trajković also added a short text on the occasion of the premiere of the work:⁶

Arion...
Nebeski svirač; nebeski pevač;
Arion...
Sklad, jednostavnost, tonalnost, ponavljanje...
PONAVALJANJE...
opsesivno ponavljanje.
Tok.
Vreme od vremena.
Vremena vreme.
VREME
VREEEME
VREEEEEEME
Kajros i Hronos

Arion...
heavenly player; heavenly singer;
Arion...
Harmony, simplicity, tonality, repetition...
REPETITION...
obsessive repetition.
Flow.

⁵ Translated by A. S. Kline <<http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/OvidFastiBkTwo.htm#Toc69367684>>, accessed 10 January 2012.

⁶ Trajković wrote this text for a group of his colleagues, but he never published it. It was reproduced in: Mirjana Veselinović, *Stvaralačka prisutnost evropske avangarde u nas* (The Creative Presence of European Avant-garde in Serbia) (Belgrade: Univerzitet umetnosti, 1983), 397.

Time from times.
TIME
THE TIME
IN TIME
Kairos and Chronos

Although Trajković has not been willing to reproduce this text ever since the premiere, it is quoted here as a relevant testimony to the author's aims concerning the emotional climate of the piece. Another comment by Trajković, cited in the booklet that accompanies the CD of his music, completes the author's perspective: 'This is *Greek* music, Mediterranean music, a musical harmony of natural elements, but above all, *Arion* is an apotheosis of the aquatic component, that of the Sea, a sea of which the surface is not agitated but perfectly calm. The music is serious, more *Doric* than *Ionic*'.⁷

To sum up: Trajković, as author of the work, found it necessary to make the listeners of *Arion* aware of his cultural and artistic preferences, by linking the work (1) to Greek and Roman mythology (the title); (2) to Roman poetry (Ovid's verses); (3) to the Renaissance movement, itself of course, linked to antiquity (Caccini's collection); (4) to Trajković's own aesthetics based on 'harmony, simplicity, tonality, repetition' (fragment from his comment on the work); as well as to his high esteem of ancient Greek culture as a whole ('This is *Greek* music...'). The music of *Arion* corresponds fully to the exposed program: its character is meditative and slightly nostalgic, objectively distanced; the sounding of the chords are prolonged and separated by pauses, suggesting tranquillity and stillness; the effect of simplicity is achieved through the use of minimalistic and repetitive techniques, the harmony is monodic and tonal (modal). At the time (1979), those features were regarded as almost subversive, since avant-garde thinking was still considered to be a necessary requirement for a piece of new music to be considered as 'serious' and 'responsible', at least in Serbia (itself part of ex-Yugoslavia). Trajković's affinity with the aesthetics of Impressionism, concretely of Debussy and Ravel, could be observed in the refined sonorities and sensuous harmonies of *Arion*, its static quality and quasi-improvisatory effects, with subtle changes of tempi. Eight sustained chords – whose modal sounds can be easily associated to jazz, presented successively in the strings from the very start, and followed by eight short melodies of modal features in the guitar part – are conceived as an introduction to the central sections, in which the singing of Arion is evoked in the strings with magical effects of glissandi and flageolet-tones, whereas the guitar part illustrates the mythical singer as accompanying himself on the lyre.

The other work by Trajković that is worth mentioning in the context of ancient Greek mythological subjects is *Zephyrus Returns*, after Petrarch (1304–1374), for flute, viola and piano (2003). Subtly evoking far-away landscapes and mythical events, illustrating them at some points (mild winds, waves on the sea surface, sprinkling water, bird singing) or

⁷ Neda Bebler, liner notes of the CD: Trajković, *Arion, Ballad and Ten Preludes, Piano Impromptu, The Defence of Our City* (PGP RTS, 431081, 2001), 6.

marking the presence of the main 'phenomena' and 'characters' (the appearance of which – for instance of Mars, Venus and Harmonia in the second movement and that of 'The stars turning pale' in the first – is indicated in the score), the composer creates luminous and magical sound images, rich with inner movements, but at the same time preserves control over them, suggesting nevertheless a marked sense of freedom. Constant, but almost imperceptible changes of the musical material on the micro-level lead to moments when the need is felt for introducing new material, which is never done by sharp contrast. The imaginative and refined ametrical rhythmical animation of the musical material produces the effect of fluidity and dematerialisation – as suitable to suggest emotions born from meditations on the eternal Nature and man's confrontation with the World and its Mystery. The third movement is imbued with dance rhythms, which is most probably to be understood as a gesture of honouring Maurice Ravel's poetics of dance.

As is often the case, in his wish to explain his poetic inspiration Trajković supplied the score of the piece with a number of interesting texts which give valuable insight into the work. A sentence from Simone Weil's *L'Enracinement* (The Need for Roots, 1943) serves as a motto for the whole work: 'L'acquisition des connaissances fait approcher de la vérité quand il s'agit de la connaissance de ce qu'on aime et en aucun autre cas' (The acquisition of knowledge brings one nearer to the truth when it comes to cognition of something one loves, and only in that case). This thought could perhaps be interpreted as a call to bring together rational and emotional energies while attempting to achieve a creative act worthy of that name. The other texts figuring in the score indicate that the composer was inspired by a sonnet of Petrarch, whose beginning became the title of the musical work: *Zefiro torna*. That same sonnet was chosen by Claudio Monteverdi for the composition of a five-part madrigal, which was published in his Book VI of *Madrigals* (1614), a piece of which Trajković is particularly fond. Petrarch's poem is built upon the contrast between the return of spring, which brings with it the rebirth of life and love, and the poet's separateness from that joyful event due to the death of his beloved. He is insensitive to the beauty of nature, whose forces are evoked through the mythological figures of Jupiter, Venus, Procne and Philomena. It is quite possible, and maybe it has been proved, that Petrarch wrote that sonnet moved by the premature death of his beloved Laura. The same was the case with Monteverdi, whose madrigal on those verses of Petrarch was a tribute to his wife, who had died seven years earlier (1607).

The first movement is entitled 'Céphale et Aurore aux doigts de rose: Louange de la brise de matin venue des astres pâissants' (Cephalus and Rosy-Fingered Aurora: Praise to the Morning Breeze Coming from the Stars Turning Pale). The reference to the breeze is made because the myth of Cephalus (prince of Thessaly and grandson of Aeolus, god of winds) and his wife Procris tells us that he used to talk to the breeze as if it were a woman, thus provoking some confusion. Procris' subsequent jealousy towards Aurora, the goddess of Dawn, eventually led to Procris' fatal death. The second movement bears the title 'Mars et Vénus anadyomène: Louange de la nymphe Harmonie, l'esprit du Monde, issue d'eux deux, le dieux et la déesse' (Mars and Venus Rising from the Sea: Praise of the Nymph Harmonia,

the Essence of the World, Issued from the Two of Them, the God and the Goddess). There is no allusion to a mythological story connected to Harmonia (for instance that of her cursed necklace), the names of Harmonia and her parents being sufficiently symbolic. The title of the third and last movement is 'Danaé et Jupiter, pluie d'or: Louange de Persée, le triomphateur de la Gorgone Méduse' (Danae and Jupiter, Golden Rain: Praise of Perseus, Victor over the Gorgon Medusa).⁸

One may wonder why Trajković chose precisely those three mythological stories for his work. Although it may seem that there are no thematic links among them, it could be proposed that common elements are noticeable in the symbolism of Zephyrus, a divinity that certainly does not stand accidentally in the title of the whole work. Zephyrus is a wind god, blowing from the West, and is associated with the first season of the year, as bringer of light spring and early summer breezes. The gentlest of the winds, Zephyrus is also known for being a fructifying wind, helping men's work in the fields. Zephyrus is sometimes accompanied by Aura (as in Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*), the female light wind whose name means *breeze* in Latin. That name is the Latin version of Eos/Aura/Aurora, one of the main figures in the myth of Cephalus alluded to in the first movement of the work.

It may seem clear now that all those narratives (Petrarch's sonnet and the three mythological stories forming part of Trajković's music) are centred on the celebration of nature's beauty and force, and for obvious reasons spring is the main symbol of those forces, especially of rebirth and youth. We shall return to those keywords a little later.

It could be observed that the first two of the three basic elements of nature mentioned in Petrarch's poem – air, water and ground (*l'aria, l'acqua, la terra*) – that are 'full of love' have an important place in all the three mythological stories chosen by Trajković: air/wind in the first movement ('Cephalus and Rosy-Fingered Aurora'), then water in the form of the sea in the second movement ('Mars and Venus Rising from the Sea') and water in the form of Golden Rain in the last movement ('Danae and Jupiter, Golden Rain'). That can explain why the music of Trajković's work is so extremely delicate and refined, being a musical representation of fluidity, weightlessness and transparency. The atmosphere is meditative and the style a kind of Neo-Impressionism, with complex and refined harmonies and delicate colouring.

As has been said earlier, Trajković always felt very close to French music and that of other Latin countries, especially Spain, as well as that of Slavic countries. So, who is missing here? In the first place Austrian and German music, those that are almost never omitted! In some of his published texts Trajković has elaborated his views on much of twentieth-century music, which, according to him, took a wrong direction when it accepted the course led by Schoenberg and his twelve-tone music. He exposed there his admiration for the other direction, that of Debussy's 'hybrid modality, a system capable of organizing the totality of a

⁸ Perseus is the son of that god and Danae, a mortal girl.

new and systematic morphological dynamism'.⁹ Another thought of Trajković is worth mentioning in the context of this paper: by drawing attention to the ancient Greek modes, he observed that the chromatic genus was projected into Debussy's '*fully three-dimensional chromatic musical space of [...] hybrid modality*'; a projection of the ancient enharmonic genus being expected to occur only with bi- and poly-modality, the systems to be found already in Debussy, but also in early Stravinsky, in Prokofiev, in late Ravel, late De Falla and in the music of *The Six*'.¹⁰

Some other layers of meaning of Trajković's *Zephyrus Returns* are provided by the composer's dedications of each of the three movements to the memory of a person he held in especially high esteem. He provided only initials of those names, but the enigmas are easily solved thanks to the concise elaborations. The first movement is written 'à la mémoire de D. G., le fondateur de la morphologie générale' (in memory of D[ragutin] G[ostuški], the founder of general morphology), the second 'à la mémoire de C. D., le seul vrai fondateur de la seule musique moderne digne de ce nom' (in memory of C[laude] D[ebussy], the only true founder of the only truly modern music worthy of that name), and the third 'à la mémoire de M. R. qui eu la fantaisie exquise de ne viser les splendeurs de l'antiquité grecque qu'à travers l'optique du Siècle des lumières' (in memory of M[aurice] R[avel], whose exquisite fantasy led him to contemplate the splendours of Greek antiquity only through the optics of the Century of Enlightenment). The three dedications make one complete picture, that of the composer's world of music and art. Dragutin Gostuški (1923–1998) was a Serbian aesthetician, musicologist and composer, whose writings Trajković considered to be extremely valuable, in particular his book *Vreme umetnosti. Prilog zasnivanju jedne opšte nauke o oblicima* (The Time of the Arts. A Contribution to the Foundation of a General Morphology, 1968).¹¹ Among the ideas exposed in the book, Trajković seems to have been particularly impressed by those of the periodical recurrence of Classicism in European art, the identification of the appearance of opera by the end of the sixteenth century, and the short subsequent dominance of monody as Renaissance in music – not as early Baroque, which had often been asserted in histories of music. According to Gostuški, the last time Classicism was 're-incarnated' in art music was at the beginning of the twentieth century, but then it was not powerful enough to provide a stylistic frame of longer duration. As had been the case with the Renaissance and eighteenth-century Classicism, the supposed Classicism of the early twentieth century was the consequence of a will to restore classical values, to regenerate art and music, hand in hand with the simplification of forms. Now, as we very well know, the beginning of the twentieth century was a time when very diverse developments took place, among which most noteworthy

⁹ Vlastimir Trajković, 'Thinking the Rethinking (of the Notion of) Modernity (in Music)', in Dejan Despić and Melita Milin (eds.), *Rethinking Musical Modernism* (Belgrade: Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts and Institute of Musicology SASA, 2008), 30–31.

¹⁰ Ibid. 31.

¹¹ Dragutin Gostuški, *Vreme umetnosti. Prilog zasnivanju jedne opšte nauke o oblicima* (Beograd: Muzikološki institut and Prosveta, 1968).

were those linked to the achievements of Debussy in Paris and those of Schoenberg in Vienna. In his book Gostuški did not connect his idea of a new Classicism/Renaissance with any movement in particular, but he mentioned in that context the works of different composers: Schoenberg, Berg, Debussy, Satie, Stravinsky, without elaborating their relatedness to his idea of Classicism/Renaissance. It was Trajković who in some of his writings undertook to discuss that hypothesis of a new Classicism which he called Modernism. According to him, it was Debussy who had performed a kind of modernistic revolution by giving his creative response to the crisis of tonality, which preoccupied his contemporaries. So, Trajković wrote: 'The historical crisis of tonality had been solved around 1900, Modern musical times began in Paris, the rotten classical tonality having been succeeded not by traditionalist and "devoted" disciples of Germany's "three-great-Bs", but by Debussy's system of genuinely novel *hybrid modality*, a system capable of organizing *the totality of a new and systematic morphological dynamism*'.¹² Trajković then expands on 'a projection of Ancient Greek chromatic genus into the *fully three-dimensional chromatic musical space* of Debussy's hybrid modality' – thus making an implicit claim that Debussy's 'modernist revolution' stood for a kind of twentieth-century Classicism/Renaissance.

Let us return now to Trajković's two works, *Arion* and *Zephyrus Returns*. Taking into account both his music and his writings, we can notice a firm logic in the relations between the two spheres. One line is drawn from the ancient Greek myths via Renaissance poetry (Petrarch) and music (Caccini, Monteverdi) to French modernist music (Debussy, Ravel, Messiaen); the other line is an assertion of the importance of modality/non-functional harmony in the history of music, and it starts with ancient Greek modes, it has its high point in sixteenth-century modality, and is reborn in the early twentieth-century different kinds of (hybrid) modalities.

Sensitivity to the culture of ancient Greece, noticeable with the French composers at the turn of the nineteenth century and during the next decades, cannot be viewed separately from the wider movement in French arts of the times that sought to (re)defining national identity, which was felt to be threatened by German art in the first place. Looking back at the glorious history of French music, composers could not but react positively to the charm of eighteenth-century French Classicism, which was itself largely inspired by ancient Greek art and culture. Ravel speaks thus about the vision of 'the Greece of his dreams', which inspired his *Daphnis and Chloé*: 'Mon intention en l'écrivant était de composer une vaste fresque musicale, moins soucieuse d'archaïsme que de fidélité à la Grèce de mes rêves, qui s'apparente assez volontiers à celle qu'ont imaginé et dépeinte les artistes français de la fin du XVIIIe siècle' (My intention, in writing it, was to compose a vast musical fresco, less thoughtful of archaism, than of fidelity to the Greece of my dreams, which identifies quite willingly with that imagined and depicted by late eighteenth-century French artists).¹³

¹² Trajković, 'Thinking the Rethinking (of the Notion of) Modernity (in Music)', 30–31.

¹³ Maurice Ravel, 'Esquisse autobiographique (rédigée en octobre 1928 par Roland Manuel, sous la dictée de l'auteur)', *La Revue musicale* (special issue) (1938), 21–22.

It is possible to observe in Trajković's works a similar aesthetic attitude towards those specific epochs of the past, including some features related to those of the Impressionists' – especially Debussy's – world of the Idyllic, to his vision of Arcadia.¹⁴ To that should be added Trajković's marked affinity with the musical language of those French composers, so it should not come as a surprise that his music, similar to that of the great Impressionists, is introspective, serene, with the prolonged duration of musical events bringing moments of complete silence, refined sonorities derived from post-Messiaen modal harmonies and complex and subtle metrical organisation. His music is evocative and descriptive in ways similar to those of Debussy and Messiaen: not only do the titles often have poetic qualities, but also the scores have verbal indications similar to those in Messiaen's works.

Whereas Trajković's works commented above – *Epimetheus*, *Arion*, and *The Return of Zephyrus* – are purely instrumental, the output of Aleksandra-Anja Đorđević shows strong inclinations to chamber music with vocal elements (usually solo female voices). Two among her works deserve attention in the context of the topic of this paper and they both belong to musical theatre genres: the chamber opera *Narcis i Eho* (Narcissus and Echo, 2002) and the stage cantata *Atlas* (2008). Before approaching those works, first a short glimpse at the composer's career will be provided.

Đorđević was born in Belgrade in 1970. She studied composition at the Faculty of Music in the class of Trajković, and afterwards continued her studies with Zoran Erić to get an MA degree. Both her teachers are distinguished Serbian composers who had understanding for her affinity towards combining high and low genres in her works. Among other activities, she used to make arrangements for the music of Goran Bregović – an internationally renowned composer and performer of popular music – employing a mixture of different folk idioms originating mainly from the Balkans. She has also showed an early interest in writing music for theatre plays and dances. Thanks to her talent for singing, she has been a member of groups of musicians that performed both traditional Balkan music and contemporary art music. Đorđević has never been attached to an institution and lives as a freelance composer in Belgrade.

¹⁴ 'Les références à l'Arcadie ne se trouvent pas chez Debussy dans ses opéras mais plutôt dans ses œuvres orchestrales ou instrumentales, et non des moindres : *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, *Syrinx*, *Trois Chansons de Bilitis* sur un texte de Pierre Louÿs. On peut également citer chez Ravel, le *Daphnis et Chloé* (1912) et aussi *Écho et Narcisse* de Tcherepnine (1911), *Bacchus et Ariane* (1930) de Roussel et l'opéra de Jacques Ibert *Persée et Andromède* (1921), *Polyphème* de Jean Cras (1922)' (The references to Arcadia are not to be found in Debussy's operas, but rather in his orchestral or instrumental works, and those among them which are not the least important: *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*, *Syrinx*, *Three Songs of Bilitis* on a text by Pierre Louÿs. One could also cite Ravel's *Daphnis and Chloé* (1912) and also *Echo and Narcisse* by Tcherepnin (1911), *Bacchus and Ariadne* (1930) by Roussel and the opera *Perseus and Andromeda* (1921) by Jacques Ibert, *Polyphemus* by Jean Cras (1922)). Quoted from Jacques Gilbert, 'Autour d'Elektra: Modernité, mythe et néoclassicisme', in Pascal Terrien (ed.), *Autour d'Elektra de Richard Strauss* (Les Cahiers du CERCI, 3; Nantes: Centre de Recherche sur les Conflits d'Interprétation, 2008), 31–46.

The libretto of *Narcissus and Echo*, written by the young poet Marija Stojanović, was inspired by the classical Greek myth of the nymph Echo, who fell in love with the handsome and vain hunter Narcissus, who was nevertheless incapable of loving anybody but himself. When he saw his own reflection in a pool, he fell in love with it, and not wishing to leave the spot, he eventually died (in some versions of the myth he committed suicide). The work, which is structured as a number opera in three short acts, takes place in modern times. It is centred on the self-obsessed yuppie Narcissus and the girl Echo, who loves him and is represented by her voice only (sung 'naturally', in a non-operatic way). The opera is heavily charged with layers of meaning that could invite psychoanalytical interpretations, among others. The overall tone is parodical and critical of the contemporary orientation towards corporeality, hedonism, and speedy social advancement – somehow strange in a country that had recently emerged from a nightmarish decade of wars in ex-Yugoslavia, and was highly traumatised by them. In an interview Đorđević gave for an Internet site she explained her attitude towards this work of hers:

I think that it's a really modern story. It covers inhibition, selfishness – today those topics they seem more relevant than ever. We meet it everywhere, like a kind of illness. To quote the fashion designer Paco Rabanne [sic] on the topic, 'Narcissim is definitely the symbol of today. There is no doubt that the cult of the self is the dominant religion. People who choose to grow old, to die, to pass their experiences to their successors, to share anything with anybody. Tell me about myself because that's the only thing I'm interested in. Everybody wants to feel good, here and now, only he and nobody else'.¹⁵

These three short acts, performed without breaks, present the main motifs of the story in concentrated form. Besides Narcissus and Echo, the only other characters on stage are two Nymphs, conceived as a chorus along the lines of antique tragedies. The costumes they wear are contemporary: when Narcissus takes off his business suit, he keeps a sleeveless T-shirt, ready to exercise in a gym; Echo (performed by the composer herself) has a long, shimmering dress, designed in pop-star style; the Nymphs are heavily made-up, have their hair dyed black, and wear punk-style black outfits.

The first act consists of an Overture and four numbers. In numbers 1 and 3 the Nymphs comment on the story; Echo appears alone in No. 2; Narcissus, accompanied by the Nymphs, appears in No. 4. Thus the two main characters do not appear together on stage until numbers 3 and 4 of Act II, and from then on until the end they remain apart. That feature already indicates that the composer did not aim to present a dramatic action, but focussed instead on several fragments of the myth, which are interpreted freely. The libretto offers poetic transpositions of the myth's main arguments in the form of monologues, and comments, which would be difficult to follow if the Narcissus myth was not generally known. The ironical mood prevails in scenes centred on Narcissus, for instance

¹⁵ Emily Pearce, *Ten Minutes with Anja Djordjevic* <<http://www.thepublicreviews.com/interview-ten-minutes-with-anja-djordjevic/>>, accessed 19 December 2011.

in two 'Love Songs' in Act II, in which Echo promises that she will be 'colourless and transparent like glass' and that she will 'serve him as a lamp, a necessary thing, a *thing*'.

The musical models parodied in Đorđević's *Narcissus and Echo* are taken from baroque operas, so typical procedures are regular, motorised pulsations of small motif cells: for instance in the Overture and Nos. 2 and 4 (Marches) of Act III, or the *maestoso* dotted rhythms in Nos. 1 and 5 (Odes) of Act II. The music of No. 1 of Act II ('Narcissus' Aria) is most reminiscent of Baroque models. The composer parodies arias characteristic of that epoch through the use of typical ornamentations and motorised rhythm. She also – imaginatively – writes the vocal part for a counter-tenor, thus making reference to castrato arias. Baroque and minimalist-repetitive procedures are combined to contribute to the creation of this postmodern chamber opera, which communicates with and engages the public very well (as witnessed at performances both in Belgrade and during a tour in the United Kingdom).¹⁶

The vocal parts are basically of recitative and repetitive nature, with rare, short melismatic ornamentations, and the incorporation of elements from popular music, including music-hall and cabaret (most markedly in No. 1 of Act II, 'The Two Nymphs'). Those features lead us to suggest a link between Đorđević's *Narcissus and Echo* and the trend in interwar European stage works to present mixtures of heterogeneous elements, such as those taken from Singspiel, jazz and cabaret (for instances in pieces by Křenek, Milhaud and Weill). In contrast to those earlier works, Đorđević's opera does not pursue alienating effects, since its general mood is more ironical than satirical.

The other work by Đorđević which is relevant to our topic is her stage cantata *Atlas* for voice, narrator, and chamber orchestra (2008), based on the book *Weight: The Myth of Atlas and Heracles* by the contemporary British writer Jeanette Winterson. In an interview the composer said that she had always been interested in ancient myths, that still resound in our time.¹⁷ She found the text she needed in Winterson's book, in whose preface the author summarised her motive for writing in the following way: '*Weight* moves far away from the simple story of Atlas's punishment and his temporary relief when Heracles takes the world off his shoulders. I wanted to explore loneliness, isolation, responsibility, burden, and freedom, too, because my version has a very particular end not found elsewhere'.¹⁸ As could be expected, the author re-imagined the story of the myth, adding to it autobiographical passages with the aim of making obvious the relationships between the big and the small story. The titan Atlas (brother of Prometheus, Epimetheus and Menoetius)

¹⁶ The premiere of the opera – that has been previously awarded the most prestigious award for composers in Serbia, the *Mokranjac* prize – was performed on 10 October 2002 in the Belgrade BITEF theatre. Several other performances followed and more recently, in September 2011, several performances of the opera were given in English during a tour in the United Kingdom.

¹⁷ S.L.R., 'Pop vokal u svetu kameron muzike' (A Pop Singer in the World of Chamber Music), *Blic*, 3 October 2010 <<http://www.blic.rs/Kultura/Vesti/209948/Pop-vokal-u-svetu-kameron-muzike>>, accessed 10 January 2012.

¹⁸ Jeanette Winterson, *Weight. The Myth of Atlas and Heracles* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2005), xiv. Serbian translation: Dženet Vinterson, *Teret. Mit o Atlasu i Heraklu* (Beograd: Geopoetika, 2005).

was punished by having to support the whole Earth on his shoulders forever, because of his rebellion against the Olympic gods. He accepted Heracles' offer to take over holding the globe, in exchange for bringing him golden apples from the Hesperides (Atlas' daughters), but was cheated after he had done his part of the bargain. Winterson's literary transposition of the well-known narrative is recognisable until the final chapter and the strange *dénouement* it brings: Atlas, who suffers never-ending cosmic loneliness, is saved when he decides to free himself from the burden (with no catastrophe following the act) and is then joined by Laika, the dog that had been launched into space by the Soviet Sputnik in 1957! In fact, the writer needed such a positive ending because it paralleled her own life story: an example of successfully breaking conventions and managing to find hope and love.

As much as Đorđević was excited about Winterson's *Weight*, that did not apply to the story as a whole. She did not include either the autobiographical parts or the episodes with Heracles in her cantata, deciding to focus on man's striving to overcome all kinds of weight that are obstacles to his fulfilment as an individual. Đorđević's cantata is structured as a series of sung numbers with narrator's parts inserted between them. Whereas the narrator interprets fragments from *Weight*, the sung numbers have texts that are poems written by four Serbian poets (Marija Stojanović – author also of the libretto for *Narcissus and Echo* – Minja Bogavac, Maja Pelević and Periša Perišić). The composer asked her four friends to meditate on Winterson's book and write poems on the main ideas, then she selected a number of them which suited her own ideas most.¹⁹ Metaphorical and allusive, they refer only indirectly to the myth of Atlas. The sung numbers of the cantata, which are based on those poems, keep mainly to the style Đorđević had applied in *Narcissus and Echo*, more specifically to the style of numbers featuring Echo. As in the chamber opera, the stage cantata is composed of heterogeneous musical styles, popular and classical, but in the latter work they are more integrated, giving as a result a predominantly cabaret-like stage work. The only vocalist (the composer herself) is on stage all the time, surrounded by ten orchestral players (strings, piano, horn in F, bassoon, clarinet in B and percussions) and her numbers alternate with those of the Narrator. The musical forms are simple, vocal lines subtle and respectful of the text, while staying melodious, sometimes even catchy, in a broadly defined pop style. Although the texture is homophonic, it is not a plain one, but enriched with meaningful and discreet counterpoint and ornaments.

Vlastimir Trajković and Anja Đorđević are two contemporary Serbian composers of different generations and musical sensibilities, who have been selected in this paper for the study of different ways of approaching ancient Greek myths from contemporary perspectives. In view of the small number of works that have served as 'samples' (only four!), it is difficult to generalise on their ideological contexts within the contemporary Serbian and international musical scenes. However, some conclusions can be drawn

¹⁹ See more about the work and its creation in Jelena Janković, "Let me Tell the Story from the Beginning". About the Stage Cantata *Atlas* by Anja Djordjević, *New Sound*, 32 (2008), 200–209 <<http://www.newsound.org.rs/en/pdfs/ns32/16.%20Jelena%20Jankovic.pdf>>, accessed 10 January 2012.

regarding the ideological contexts of the two authors' creative attitudes towards the mythical contents of their works.

Like so many other composers, Trajković has managed to find his identity as a creator by 'choosing' his 'ancestors' in the worlds of music, art and culture – in his case this meant mainly ancient Greek, Italian Renaissance and twentieth-century French art and music. He has pursued an aesthetic aim which could be understood as a will to assert the continuity of European art based on Greek culture, and to demonstrate that a kind of new Renaissance is still possible through exploring ways of formal freedom, always aiming at order and clarity – preserving at the same time the refinement of rhythm and harmony – and integrating elements of popular music, which could help restore the components of emotion in art music. Keeping alive links with ancient Greek culture, specifically with its mythology, could be interpreted in Trajković's case as a small narrative of constituting/defining his identity as a composer by transcending national borders of tradition and opting for a cosmopolitanism for which Greek antiquity may serve as a symbol. Maybe it is necessary to remark that such an aesthetic and ideological position does not by any means indicate the composer's anti- or a-national attitude, evidence for which could be found in a number of his works. An attempt has been made in this paper towards a closer definition of Trajković's ideology, manifested as a variant of cosmopolitanism which privileges the Franco-Latin branch of European art music over the Germanic. The keywords that characterise *Arion* and *Zephyrus Returns* – new music ('nuove musiche'), the Renaissance (Caccini), and nature (spring winds, sea, awakening of nature) – can be seen as depicting the contemporary state of mind – not just that of one composer, a state of mind calling for a fresh start to preserve continuity with the past, but at the same time opening new horizons.

On the other hand, Đorđević regards ancient Greek mythology as a rich well for universalising her critical views on the relations among individuals in contemporary society. In her chamber opera *Narcissus and Echo* and stage cantata *Atlas*, both composed on original libretti, she deals with the issues of narcissism, unrequited love, fate, loneliness, rebellion and freedom. Especially in the opera, she displays a postmodernist sensibility, a high sense of irony and parody, and leans heavily on pop music. The composer is sensitive to all music around her, not just art music, and she integrates features of different popular music genres into her works, making them accessible to a wider public. Such an approach, using a musical language spread globally, appears to be another expression of cosmopolitan ideology, a suitable way, among others, to give expression to experiences, views, and feelings raised by the ancient Greek myths. Both works discussed in this paper have preserved just a kernel of the selected myths; they have retold the stories exploiting texts which use the mythical story only as a starting point for articulating – in a contemporary and fresh manner – existential dilemmas facing mankind in the past and nowadays.